Hergesheimer on "The Great Hunger"

I.

THE tragic difficulty of novels unannounced by adventitious circumstance or stereotyped names is to find friends. They always exist, even in generous numbers for really fine writing, but they are scattered, and there is nothing in the exterior of a book to reassure the thoughtful and—of necessity—sceptical reader. Hundreds of "great" novels are published every season, novels surpassing Conrad's or Hardy's, easily "better than the Russians" at their own game; they are purchased with the hope—the vain hope—that they will at least fulfil a part of the advertised promise. But even this they fail to do, and a fresh assault is made on the same terms.

If, for example, Mr. Galsworthy had not departed from his invariable custom and written a public commendation of *The Great Hunger* (Moffat, Yard & Company), I probably should never have read it. The quality of the review and of his personal preoccupations, told me that it was not the special form of creative literature which most engages me; such turned out to be fact, but there was so much beauty, so much pure gold, in *The Great Hunger* that to follow Mr. Galsworthy's praise was not only a pleasure but an absolute duty.

I have spoken of the friends of a novel, and it will be immediately seen that, with the novels, they must vary very widely. The friends of one are not the friends of all: the adherents of Tarzan would form no warm attachment for Johan Bojer's book. It is common honesty here to admit that—in the accepted, yes, the vulgar, sense—it hasn't a happy ending. Naturally the popular human conception of a happy end is the acquisition of fame and fortune and what conventionally, is called love. Of course it is not love, for there, too, a material symbol is insisted on—either physical beauty, money or an amazing chastity. Love is different from this, just as *The Great Hunger* is different from volumes catching up and reechoing the stupid, lying formulas of a gilded and easy triumph.

Nothing, except the splendid passionate style of *The Great Hunger* is easy: Peer Holm, the illegitimate son of a captain and man of fashion, fights all his life for the successive objects of his ends, and usually, at the point of success, they dissolve into the slow dawning realization that they were only cold mist. At the last these veils, penetrated one by one in suffering, are put aside and Peer rises to victory . . . but it is solely a victory within himself—the clamorers for visible and impressive circumstance, like the dull villagers among whom Peer Holm finally became a blacksmith, will find unrelieved cause for dissatisfaction.

Like all novels true to the deeper qualities of Christ it will be a cause of annoyance to a world of fat comfort, where religion is conveniently held in an automatic and calendared observance. Here, discarding every deadening reassurance, a man is relentlessly drawn across the loud plain of life, through poverty, hunger and loneliness and loss, through triumph and riches—if this were transposed to the end all the requirements of wide popularity would be assured—sensual love, champagne, gay music and thronged parties. However, he moves on into the darkness of utter material disaster and the most insidious suffering that men can endure.

JOHAN BOJER

Out of so much Peer emerges, a Peer wasted and streaked with gray, who has had to send his children to others for support; Peer, who harnessed the Nile, hammering the steel sparks into an obscure hut; with, at the last, only this for our reward—that he sows his bitter enemy's field with barley. Only this, but it is my foremost conviction, the foundation on which eventually everything else must rest, that it is the most radiantly happy end imaginable.

II.

When I mentioned that *The Great Hunger* was not precisely the type of novel to which my preference was addressed I meant and discovered that Johan Bojer had essentially a more optimistic mind than my own; there was in him the seriousness of a writer convinced that men were perfectable. This splendid feeling carries with it an irresistible responsibility—a duty outside the severe boundaries of my, it may well be less important, engagement. In this his novel fulfils every conceivable obligation: it is an authentic document of heroic spirituality. Yet if it had been that alone I should never have undertaken to speak of it formally. How, acceptably, could I? *The Great Hunger* has another side, a quality of a different beauty, and about which, with encouragement, I could write interminably.

Just exactly what that beauty is I am unprepared, together with every one else who has given a life to its mystery, to say. Yet it has such a tangible reality, so many men may discern it in common, that it is permissible to discuss it with only the faultiest understanding. But here, again, I am under an apparent disadvantage—I have no actual knowledge of the meaning of practically all the words used in critical efforts of this kind.

The reason for this may well be that I am not a critical writer, and that such an effort on my part can be no more than presumptuous. That has some truth, but not an overwhelming amount; on many sides the creative writer and the mere reader are closer to the core of a novel than the professional or temperamental critic. This is a statement that I can affirm with a certain painful security. The stirring beauty of *The Great Hunger*, I am convinced, can be best expressed in terms of warm enthusiasm rather than from remote position of fixed detachment. It would perhaps be correct to say that it is clearest explained in phrases of its own kind.

Beauty, then, exists in it to a thrilling degree, the beauty that pinches the heart and interferes with breathing. It has the inexplicable loveliness that rare individuals possess, and which by no means can be accounted for in set conventional attributes. In the first place, it is the book of a singularly pure mind; not the opaque purity of a glazed white porcelain surface, but that of an undefiled revealing spaciousness; it is the book of a mind above any bribe or mitigating lie or quilted compromise. Consequently it is not a novel for the bribed, the liars or the easily dogmatic. Its beauty, for recognition, demands something in the way of corresponding virtue.

My pleasure in it was incidental and unmoral, a delight in the simple vivified life of the passages: Peer, a country boy with his little chest on his shoulder, comes to town and finds a boarding place for country folk; he is defrauded, for the moment, of his patrimony by a detestable individual, and sturdily sets to work, to work and grind and blunder through technical pages while youth is wandering through the summer evening streets:

"And in the evening he would stick his head out of his two paned window that looked on to the street and would see the lads and girls coming back, flushed and noisy, with flowers and green boughs in their hats, crazy with sunshine and fresh air."

Impressed by a growing sense of responsibility, no more than a boy in a wretched shell of a room, he sends for his half sister, lonely like himself, and together, after some scant bread and butter and doubtful coffee, they drift happily from waking dreams to sleep:

"Well, good night, Louise."

"Good night, Peer."

Why this, in particular, should be beautiful I am unprepared to say; yet that pinching of the heart, the catch in breathing, were sudden and tyrannical. Such notes are only fragmentary, but then anything beside the novel itself will be. There are many such irradiated episodes; yet I must admit that I found those at the beginning and the end the most irresistible. There is, curiously enough, something in the spectacle of material success fatal to the emotion I am attempting to indicate.

III.

The more serious aspects, those, at least, so generally regarded as more serious, of *The Great Hunger*, I must leave for discussion to abler abilities than mine. Mr. Galsworthy has already done it very perfectly. But no one could miss the utter charm of Bojer's girls and women. In spite of limitless protestations to the contrary, charming women are few in fiction; perhaps, though, no scarcer there than in life. Anyhow, their tenderness, their lovely shyness and poignant surrenders, the little vanities and wistful smiles and muslins, pervade Johan Bojer's pages.

Louise and Merle, the saeter girl that—after she has finished the milking—Peer kissed, vibrate with reality and appealing warmth. They are drawn with the magic which is—to me—the supreme literary gift; they and the moments in which they are presented:

"It was near midnight when he stood by the shore of a broad mountain lake, beneath a snow flecked hillside. . . . And, see—over the lake, that still mirrored the evening red, a boat appeared moving toward the island, and two white sleeved girls sat at the oars, singing as they rowed. A strange feeling came over him. Here—here he would stay."

"Peer . . . watched her as she stood in her long white gown before the toilet table with the little green shaded lamps, doing her hair for the night in a long plait. Neither of them spoke. He could see her face in the glass, and saw that her eyes were watching him, with a soft, mysterious glance—the scent of her hair seemed to fill the place with youth."

And this, at the end:

"There by the fence stood Merle, looking at me. She had drawn a kerchief forward over her brow, after the fashion of the peasant women, so that her face was in shadow; but she smiled to me—as if she, too, the stricken mother, had risen up from the ocean of her suffering that here, in the daybreak, she might take her share in the creating of God."

That, as I began by saying, will be widely regarded as an unhappy ending; but if Peer and Merle had been left standing on the terrace of their country house, looking down over their gardens and orchards and stables, if they had been left rich and arrogant and inert, all would have been well. As it is—the whisper of the only possible salvation, the utmost optimism—the public will shift uneasily, mutter or even impatiently protest, and turn with a sigh of forgetfulness and relief to the stupid formulas of a lying triumph. JOSEPH HERGESHEIMER.

From "Chamber Music"

By James Joyce.

My love is in a light attire
  Among the apple trees,
Where the gay winds do most desire
  To run in companies.

There, where the gay winds stay to woo
  The young leaves as they pass,
My love goes slowly, bending to
  Her shadow on the grass;

And where the sky's a pale blue cup
  Over the laughing land,
My love goes lightly, holding up
  Her dress with dainty hand.

Chamber Music. By James Joyce. B. W. Huebsch.

The Human Touch

By William Rose Benet.

A saw a camel and a chimpanzee
And a tusked walrus sitting down to tea.
And suddenly I heard a noise—and then
I knew, because they laughed, that they were men.

Stars

By Sara Teasdale.

Alone, in the night,
  On a great hill
With pines around me
  Spicy and still,

And a heaven full of stars
  Over my head,
White and topaz
  And misty red;

Myriads with beating
  Hearts of fire
That aeons
  Cannot vex or tire.

Up the dome of heaven
  Like a great hill,
I watch them marching
  Stately and still,

And I know that I
  Am honored to be
Witness
  Of so much majesty.

The Tank

By Oliver Herford.

The tank's a kind of cross between
An agricultural machine
And something fierce and pliocene;
Over embankments, trees and walls,
Trenches, barbed wire and forts it crawls;
Nothing can stay its course—the tank
Has not the least respect for rank
Or file; with equal joy it squashes
All things alike—men, beasts and Boches.

From The Laughing Willow. George H. Doran Company.

"Did You Never Know"?

By Sara Teasdale.

Did you never know, long ago, how much you loved me—
  That your love would never lessen and never go?
You were young then, proud and fresh hearted.
  You were too young to know.

Fate is a wind, and red leaves fly before it,
  Far apart, far away in the gusty time of year—
Seldom we meet now, but when I hear you speaking,
  I know your secret, my dear, my dear.